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ABSTRACT

ISSUES, an intermediate-grade social studies program, actively involves 2,000 Kansas City students of their urban communities. Psychological and sociological perspectives on urban problems stress helping children to better understand social realities, their peers, and themselves. The students spend approximately half of their social studies time outside of the classroom investigating topics of their own choice. Indoor activities include reading and writing to record facts and create impressions, verbal interaction in discussion groups, activity planning, and listening to speakers. Students use instamatic and movie cameras to document their investigations. Student surveys of community characteristics such as neighborhood street lights and numbers of occupants per dwellings create spinoff community activities that are improving neighborhoods. Support for teachers participating in the program includes workshops, teacher-student curriculum materials, and in-school consultants services. Evaluation of the program indicates not only greater social awareness on the part of the students but also greater confidence and personal interest in the community around them. (JH)

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Innovative Social Studies in Urban Elementary Schools

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"Case No. 3114" is a thick folder filed in the Dangerous Buildings Division of City Hall in Kansas City, Missouri. It is more than a folder of paper; it's a case history of a class of kids that tore through red tape to force improvement in their neighborhood. Mrs. Dorothy Hall's 5th-graders at C. A. Franklin School found abandoned buildings to be the biggest problem in their community. They located 52 empty structures in a 24 square block area surrounding the school. A few of the buildings were boarded up, but most stood wide-open; children often played inside the rat-infested, broken-glass areas.

This group of Mrs. Hall's students were especially frightened about two buildings across from their school in which derelicts wandered in and out of the shadows. After many contacts with the Dangerous Buildings Division about removing these buildings, several students noticed one morning that two men were hauling away bricks. They were so elated they called City Hall to thank them for their efforts. But no one at City Hall had issued a wrecking permit so a police officer was dispatched to stop the wrecking. The class examined its mixed feelings; what did it matter who took the building down? Does the end justify the means? By insisting upon working credentials, does government interfere with progress? About ten days later licensed wreckers properly demolished the building and disposed of the debris.

Other problems the students found affecting their community were debris on tall-weeded, vacant lots; lack of playgrounds; litter; and roaming dogs. As Stephanie Houston, age 12, said, "Twelve people were living in a house that was so poor it looked like the porch would fall in if you stepped on it." Slide show presentations and discussions with Mayor Charles B. Wheeler, Jr., and other community leaders produced results! City officials informed the students that parents must file complaints. They did so, and with students' help in clean-up, publicity in the newspapers, and school support, the identified areas have begun to take on a new look. The first new buildings in many years are appearing on cleared lots, and community pride is evident once again. Jeffrey Polk, age 10, stated, "I learned how to take care of our city. Things happen when you call City Hall."

"Case No. 3114" is now closed, but it is only one of many in the ISSUES files of student involvement. The students have learned that they may bring about positive social change within the established channels of democracy.

THE ISSUES PROGRAM

Bigness, alienation, youth-police relations, delinquency, and lack of communication are by-words in today's society. ISSUES, a social studies program for urban elementary schools, located in Kansas City, Missouri, is an innovative and practical approach to solving the problems these terms suggest.

The ISSUES program was developed through the efforts of Dr. William B. Lieurance, Director, and Social Studies Consultants Don Mitchell, John Rivette, Joan Williams, and Shirley McGlothen. Funding was provided by the Model Cities Agency. The Urban Education Division of the School District of Kansas City, Missouri, and the Mid-Continent Regional Educational Laboratory provided cooperative support.

What is so different about ISSUES? In the past, elementary social studies dealt mainly with the reading of history and geography textbooks. It seemed to Lieurance that social studies so conceived was marked by a peculiarity not evident in other subject areas. The study of science, for example, requires that students do a great deal of science. Reading the history of science is a minor part of science study except by specialists. Similarly, the study of mathematics requires that students do a great deal of mathematics, leaving the history of math largely to advance degree students and specialists. When the study of social affairs is undertaken, however, the most common procedure is to read the history of social affairs--how we got to where we used to be. Understandably, this approach "turns students off"--whether urban, suburban, or rural. Research concerning the effectiveness of social studies instruction is negative in the main because social studies is overly verbal, unnecessarily abstract, and remote. In addition, the customary study of home, school, neighborhood, and community in grades 1, 2, and 3 is superficial. It is also inadequate to provide solid temporal and spatial orientation in a rapidly changing world.

"Suppose then," thought Lieurance, "we studied the community itself, not from a geographic or historic standpoint, but stressing psychology and sociology,

continued

to help children better understand social realities, their peers, and themselves." These three goals became the objectives of ISSUES.

PROGRAM OBJECTIVES

To implement these goals, the immediate aim of ISSUES is to provide high-interest activities that foster reflective inquiry investigations, self-awareness, personal development, and civic and career accomplishments to help build self-discipline and a sense of responsibility. The long-range direction of the ISSUES program is to develop adults who learn by observation and inquiry, work in investigating teams, think creatively and independently, develop judgment and decision-making ability, and can conceive of more satisfactory alternatives to social problems than passive acceptance or violence--in short, adults who actively practice democratic citizenship.

The desired ISSUES outcomes rest on two major premises:

1) Social studies concepts and skills and democratic attitudes are best learned from a study of *psychology and sociology* in real in-and-out-of-school settings.

2) Students must be *active participants* in real community problem solving in order that the learning processes have meaningful consequences. Isolation--whether racial, economic, social, or religious--must be eliminated.

In order to develop meaningful experiences, the subject matter of psychology and sociology is best learned through direct inquiry and research with individuals in the community, not by presentation through textbooks. In addition, psychology (the student knowing himself) and sociology (the student knowing his community) involve present, real problems (social realities) and provide a core around which other social sciences, physical sciences, mathematics, and language arts revolve and attain added significance.

Since the program emphasizes direct, on-site investigation in the community, the students must spend time outside of the classroom. It is recommended that one-half of the time allotted for social studies be spent outside school walls in on-site research. These on-site activities include many walks around the immediate neighborhood, observing its extent, its inhabitants, its needs, its problems, and its possibilities. Field trips by bus within the larger community are undertaken to determine its shape, to examine its various sections on-site, to interview its people, to learn first-hand about the operation of its businesses and industries, to observe its organizations in action, and to develop an appreciation of the relationships among the various sectors that make up the total community. Students average slightly more than one bus field trip per month.

Research inside the classroom includes: reading all types of materials, writing in various ways, i.e., recording facts, creating impressions, descriptions, documentations, and logs; verbal interaction in interaction circles (discussion groups) with students and teachers; planning together to establish the emphasis of the activities; and listening to speakers from all walks of life who have been invited to appear before students to present their role and experiences and to answer questions.

Documentation of the ISSUES program and the results of students' active inquiry is maintained through photography and sound recorders. The program has obtained 150 instamatic cameras, four movie cameras, and abundant film. Funds were also made available for film processing. The ISSUES staff designed special workbooks for students to keep a record of their activities. The workbooks serve as "experience banks" for easy storage and retrieval of data, descriptions, photos, and other materials collected by the students.

COMMUNITY AS CLASSROOM

ISSUES began as an intermediate-grade program and is currently being used by 70 teachers with 2,000 grade 4 through 8 students in nine schools. Some students have organized programs in their secondary schools as a by-product of their elementary experience.

How do you get inner-city kids interested in their community in the first place? One seventh grader explained, "The teacher let us choose whether to work on the Civil War or Community Problem Solving. Everybody in the class chose Community Problem Solving, so we began to suggest real problems that were around where we live. Some of them were drugs, vacant or abandoned buildings, pollution, traffic problems, and no parks."

A wide range of sociological activities generate continued enthusiasm. Surveys of:

- jobs adults have
- where families come from
- number of people per dwelling unit
- neighborhood street lighting
- comparison of loan couts
- reading material in the home

have provided the basis for spinoff community activities that:

- accelerated completion of neighborhood parks
- increased safety at dangerous intersections
- developed voter registration drives
- planned improved bus service
- resulted in clean-up, fix-up, and paint-up campaigns.

Evidence of such activity in the neighborhoods is apparent, since the physical environment looks better. But how do children "learn about themselves"

continued

D. A. Holmes students conduct a land survey of the neighborhood around their school using maps and cameras. Survey data and recommendations will be presented to city housing authorities.

Students from C. A. Franklin School interview younger students to see how they feel about the school.

Students from Our Lady of the Americas learn first-hand about city government from Kansas City Mayor, Charles B. Walker, Jr.

Black, white, and Mexican-American students take part in cross-school exchange visits and discussions.

Woodland Elementary students gather information concerning needed school repairs. They will present their case to the proper authorities.

ISSUES teachers and consultants demonstrate materials at Kansas City educational fair.

by doing citizenship projects rather than by reading of them in the abstract?

A student member of a neighborhood clean-up group supplies an answer: "My group filled 300 bags with trash, with the help of many people and our school. I learned that I was not as independent as I thought I was. Getting so much accomplished is not all that easy; we need help from others." A thirteen-year-old adds, "I felt a sense of accomplishment as a citizen working with a group on vacant buildings and drug abuse." Another student said, "I found out I could talk to city officials." Another found, "There's a catch to community involvement; people quit on you."

These comments suggest that real learning has taken place. Several illustrative examples further indicate understanding and accomplishment. In Our Lady of the Americas School, the students in Mrs. Joan Williams' class developed their own multi-media production. Music and words from popular songs dealing with human problems and narrative quotes from famous people were combined to present a program indicating the class' feelings about various issues. The term, ISSUES, was used to come up with the title, Individuals Seeking Solutions and Understanding of Environmental Situations. The production has been presented by the students more than 20 times to various groups, including college social studies methods classes.

GETTING THINGS DONE

In Wheatley Elementary School, a class of sixth-grade students and their teacher, Mrs. Leatha Bledsoe, discussed the ISSUES program in a discussion circle. They chose the Model Cities program in their neighborhood as the topic they would like to study. The first lesson consisted of digging out what the students already knew, what they would like to learn, and what they should know about Model Cities Programs. The students selected committees of their choice--on housing, education, jobs, health and welfare (which included problems of senior citizens), and recreation. The class started to build a vocabulary list which they added to each day. An ISSUES consultant taught the children to use cameras and movie equipment. The class began field work by walking around their neighborhood taking pictures of abandoned houses and dangerous areas. They then contacted the Neighborhood Improvement Project (NIP) of Model Cities for help in improving whatever they could. Classroom follow-up of the community study included: story-writing, reports, poetry-writing, research, photo displays with captions, and a complete use of knowledge gained. NIP representatives came into class and made presentations and answered questions. Future plans include a comprehensive study of the larger community, Kansas City.

Woodland School students are working for positive and constructive change in their school building, especially the cafeteria, where ceiling tiles regularly become unfastened and drop to the floor or crash onto a table. At the students' request, a local television station has given the problem coverage, and the students are confident of receiving the repairs needed. Students from Woodland, D. A. Holmes, Linwood, Switzer, and Phillips schools have made significant exchange visits with other schools, both inner-city and suburban. Blacks, whites, and Mexican-Americans visited and studied together for the first time. Movies such as "Billy Jack" and "Fiddler on the Roof" were viewed, followed by discussions of different subcultures and values. Lasting friendships between students "across town" from one another have ensued.

TEACHING MATERIALS

The teacher support services necessary to implement ISSUES consists of three components: 1) workshops, 2) teacher and student curriculum materials, and 3) in-school consultant services. Curriculum materials have been developed to cover various topics, such as "A Book About Me," and "Investigation of Self." The materials can be used with various grade and ability levels.

EVALUATION

Student response to ISSUES the first year was so positive that many asked for activities to continue into the summer. "This is the first time in my experience that students asked for social studies work in the summer. Students usually want recreation programs," remarks Bill Lieurance.

A visitor is immediately impressed with the enthusiasm and cooperative atmosphere that ISSUES students reflect. They are anxious to show you their projects, discuss future projects, and relate experiences, especially those that produced changes for improvement in their community.

Structured evaluations have been made by the Institute for Community Studies, a team from the University of Missouri--Kansas City, and the ISSUES staff. Teacher questionnaires, student questionnaires, control classes, interviews, and observations have been used to gauge the effectiveness of ISSUES. Some of the more significant findings were:

- ISSUES pupils more often felt more understood, happier, smarter, and stronger after discussing a community problem or issue; control pupils were more apt to feel frustrated, sad, confused, and dumb.
- More ISSUES pupils showed socially relevant awareness to topics like juvenile delinquency, crime, and City Hall, than control pupils (71% compared to 28%).
- ISSUES pupils scored consistently higher on an 8-item multiple choice test on current community issues and facts than did control group pupils.

continued

- All ISSUES pupils stated they had had discussions about the community outside of class; 33% of the control pupils had not.
- Teachers as a group strongly indicated that typical curricular objectives can be better served by the ISSUES program than by their previous social studies program.

ISSUES students have made the following comments about the program:

- "We picked what we thought ought to be done and that got lots of us interested."
- "You realize everyone's problems--not just your own--and how to solve them."
- "We learned more about each other."
- "The enthusiasm carried over to some of the parents who would help sometimes when we needed it."

As answers to complex problems are sought, too often the solutions become more complex than the problems being solved. ISSUES is based on a consistent philosophy. The dynamic, reflective investigations or inquiries it promotes provide practical and relatively simple solutions that have produced positive results. It is the kind of program about which one might well comment, "Why didn't I think of that?" Bill Lieurance believes the broader outgrowth of ISSUES "will be interdisciplinary 'super-studies' in the 1,000 square-mile classroom that is greater Kansas City. Such education will have sufficient impact that kids, teachers, and the community will get psychologically hooked. Then education will be a constructive and positive force and play its proper role in the prevention of alienation, delinquency, and failures in communication."

For more information

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ERIC DOCUMENTS

ED 057 130 - Organizing Urban Schools for Responsible Education. MF - $.65, HC - $3.29. Discusses problems of urban education and ways in which they can be solved. Involvement activities are stressed as key concepts.

ED 071 949 - Inner City Project, Western Curriculum Project on Canada Studies, Edmonton (Alberta). MF - $.65, HC - $3.29. The project goal is to promote student initiated research into problems of the inner-city. Field trip planning, simulations, city council decision-making, workshop kits using multi-media, and pamphlets on investigative techniques are developed in the project. Future plans for readings, student workbooks, and a teacher's handbook are being developed.

ED 063 135 - Vacant Lot Studies: An Environmental Investigation. Available from National Wildlife Federation, 1412 16th Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036. Order #79016, $1.50. An interdisciplinary guide for students, grades 5 through 9, including activities on the ecology processes in their neighborhoods, questionnaires for residents, objectives and methods.

ED 071 950 - Education Beyond Socialization. MF - $.65, HC - $3.29. Discusses goals of education beyond socialization: 1) transformation of inauthentic social reality, 2) global orientation, 3) development of students' creative and imaginative capacities, 4) loosening of society's conventional norms of behavior, 5) new patterns of participative decision-making, 6) education outside of school, 7) self-actualization.

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